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# ON THE MEANING OF TWO MEDIEVAL IRISH MEDICAL TERMS: *DERG DÁSACHTACH* AND *RÚAD (FH)RASACH*

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## ABSTRACT

This contribution seeks to shed light on the meaning of two terms relating to medical knowledge in early Ireland, namely *derg dásachtach* and *rúad (fh)rasach*. It is argued that these terms have not been satisfactorily translated either in published dictionaries or in medieval medical sources edited to date, and several sources are drawn upon to provide additional evidence for their use and meaning in a medical context.

## *DERG DÁSACHTACH*

This term incorporates two familiar adjectives, namely *derg* ‘red’ and *dásachtach* ‘mad, insane, furious’. A substantival use of the latter word to refer to ‘a madman, lunatic’ is also well attested in a range of medieval Irish sources. Kelly notes, for example, that in the legal tracts *dásachtach* is one of the three most common terms used in reference to individuals of unsound mind, and that in such tracts it denotes ‘the person with manic symptoms who is liable to behave in a violent and destructive manner’; someone, therefore, posing a greater threat to other people than those affected by other categories of mental instability.<sup>1</sup> The perceived necessity of protecting society from such individuals is indicated by the observation that ‘tying up a *dásachtach* is given as a valid excuse for lateness in discharging a legal obligation’.<sup>2</sup> The term could similarly be applied to domestic animals that had gone berserk, and for which the laws had to make provision. *Bethu Phátraic* recounts, for example, how a cow went mad in a cattle-enclosure and killed five other cows, but the young Patrick subsequently cured the cow (*hícais in ndásachtaig*).<sup>3</sup> In some literary contexts the distinction between man and beast is blurred: thus, McCone

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<sup>1</sup> Fergus Kelly, *A guide to early Irish law* (Dublin, 1988), 92.

<sup>2</sup> Kelly, *Guide*, 92, citing *CIH* 420.31 = *AL* i 268.3.

<sup>3</sup> Fergus Kelly, *Early Irish farming* (Dublin, 1997), 205, citing Kathleen Mulchrone (ed. and trans.), *Bethu Phátraic: the tripartite Life of Patrick. I. Texts and sources* (Dublin, 1939), 7.154–8.158.

notes that, in the depiction of *fian*-members in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, the term *dásachtach* ‘basically refers to a man or beast possessed by animal frenzy and the *díberg*-band of the three *Rúad-choin* “Red Hounds” is accompanied by a *dám dásachtach* ...’.<sup>4</sup>

*DIL* states that the term *dásachtach* is ‘obs[olete], but given in most Mod. Ir. and Sc. dict[ionaries]’, and cites the form *derg-dásachtach* as a compound alongside *dian-dásachtach* and *er-dásachtach*.<sup>5</sup> The prefixes *derg*-, *dían*- and *ér*- are, of course, all well documented as adjectival intensifiers,<sup>6</sup> but I have been unable to find any references in modern dictionaries to *dearg* + *dásachtach* as either a compound or a collocation. However, this sequence does occur in a number of alliterative descriptions from earlier texts, such as the medieval Irish version of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, where one finds the statement that *ba failidh badb derg dasachtach*, translated by Calder as ‘joyous was red mad War’.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the adjective *dásachtach* qualifies the personal name of the foreign warrior *Dearg mac Droichil* in *Duanaire Finn*:

Go Cáol crodha fa *dearg* dreach  
freagrais in *Dearg dásachtach*  
go ffearg mhoir is go fíoch  
mairg ar ar bhúail in trenláoch

‘To Caol the Valiant who was red of countenance  
the angry *Dearg* responded with great wrath and fury.  
Woe for him upon whom the strong warrior showered his  
blows!’<sup>8</sup>

*Dásachtach* could also be used in reference to inanimate or semi-animate entities to convey a sense of intenseness rather than madness or anger. We might consider, for example, the reference to an army’s *meirigi dhearg dhásachtach dho-ingabhāla* (‘angry/mad-red overpowering banner’) in the seventeenth- or eighteenth-century romantic tale *Do Imtheachta Ghenerodeis*.<sup>9</sup> A comparable usage is frequently attested in relation to fluid substances, as for example in the reference to an *abhann dhíansrothach dhásachtach* (‘swift and intensely flowing river’) in a prose passage found

<sup>4</sup> Kim McCone, ‘Juvenile delinquency in early Ireland’, *CMCS* 12 (1986), 1–22: 16. For the text, see Eleanor Knott (ed.), *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 8 (Dublin, 1963), 12 (§43).

<sup>5</sup> *DIL*, s.v. *dásachtach*. For further examples and discussion of the term’s etymology, see *LEIA*, s.v. *dáistir*.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, *DIL*, s.vv. *air*-, 2 *ér*-, 1 *dían*-, *derg*-.

<sup>7</sup> George Calder (ed. and trans.), *Imtheachta Aeniasa: the Irish Aeneid* (London, 1907; reprinted, with a new introduction by Erich Poppe, 1995), 154–5 (line 2480).

<sup>8</sup> Gerard Murphy (ed. and trans.), *Duanaire Finn: the book of the lays of Fionn, Part II*, Irish Texts Society 28 (London, 1933), 302–3 (lxiii, v. 20).

<sup>9</sup> Pádraig Ó Fiannachta (ed.), ‘*Do Imtheachta Ghenerodeis*’, *Irisleabhar Mhá Nuad* (1987), 187–235: 209 (my translation).

within a sixteenth-century bardic poem composed by Ferghal mhac Pilip Uí Dhuibhgennáin.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the adverbial construction *go dásachtach* is used in a passage from the *Life* of St Declan to indicate the intensity with which blood flowed from a wound:

*Do rinneadh míorbhuile an tan sin ar Dhéclan tre impidhe Phatraic agus tre na guidhe, óir do bí Déclan ag siubhal go nemhaireach isin slighidh, agus tárla iarann gér fris agus do gherr a chos, agus **do theilg fuil go dásachtach** agus do thionnsccain Declan beith bacach . . .*

‘A miracle was wrought at that time on Declan through the intercession and prayers of Patrick for as Declan was walking carelessly along he trod upon a piece of sharp iron which cut his foot so that **blood flowed freely** and Declan began to limp.’<sup>11</sup>

Yet another example is provided by the fourteenth-century medical tract *Regimen na Sláinte*, where Irish *dá folmuighear an t-othur co dásachtach* (‘if the patient is violently purged’) translates Latin *si quis fuerit farmacatus vehementer purgatus*.<sup>12</sup> Here again, the meaning of *dásachtach* relates to the ‘violent’ or ‘swift’ movement of a fluid or semi-fluid substance.

In addition to the entry s.v. *dásachtach*, *DIL* again cites the compound form *dergdásachtach* under the adjective *derg* ‘red, ruddy’ or ‘bloody, sanguinary’, where it is said to exemplify the use of *derg* ‘as a mere intensive’ and is translated as ‘raging mad’.<sup>13</sup> Both this citation and its English rendering are attributed to Standish O’Grady’s transcription and translation of a short Irish tract on the ‘Conditions of cautery’, attributed to Hippocrates, which O’Grady included in his catalogue description of the contents of BL Add. MS 15,582, a medical manuscript written for John Beaton of Bellanabe, Islay, and dated to 1563.<sup>14</sup> Here the term *dergdásachtach* occurs as the penultimate item in a list of human anatomical parts around which particular caution was recommended in the application of cautery, the surgical process whereby organic tissue was seared with a heated metallic instrument:

*Do chuinceaillaib an creachaidh* and so do réir Ip[ocras] in[a] leabur féin óir adeir in tan crapuid na baill ó crupán na féithe co ndlegar a creachad in tan sin ocus an uair tsínter na baill ó imarcraidh na

<sup>10</sup> Damian McManus and Éoghan Ó Raghallaigh (eds), *A Bardic miscellany: five hundred bardic poems from manuscripts in Irish and British libraries* (Dublin, 2010), 653 (my translation).

<sup>11</sup> P. Power (ed. and trans.), *Life of St. Declan of Ardmore and Life of St. Mochuda of Lismore*, Irish Texts Society 16 (London, 1914), 40–3 (my emphasis).

<sup>12</sup> James Carney (ed.), *Regimen na Sláinte: Regimen Sanitatis Magnini Mediolanensis* (3 vols, Dublin, 1942–4), vol. 3, 152 and 332.

<sup>13</sup> See *DIL*, s.v. *derg*.

<sup>14</sup> Standish O’Grady, *Catalogue of Irish manuscripts in the British Library [formerly British Museum]*, Volume 1 (London, 1926; repr. Dublin, 1992), 262–80: 262, and John Bannerman, *The Beaton: a medical kindred in the classical Gaelic tradition* (Edinburgh, 1986), 116–19.

*flicheachta* ac dortadh cum na nalt co ndlegar a creachad maille iarand dearg nó re huma ocus na baill ó téid a spirad ocus a teas nádúrdha ocus bís maille mairbe athnuagaithe iad óna creachad maille iarann nó re huma nó creachadóir croinn. Ocus adeir Ip[ocras] co leighister *sietica* mar an cédna ocus co leighister greamanna na nglún ocus na mudornn ocus na nalt co huilidhe maille leighios continóidech. Ocus adeir Ip[ocras] na baill ocus na ailt ocus na féithe cruaiditer ó leadrad nó ó tuitim nó ó losgadh co leighister iad óna creachad. Ocus adermáid mar an cédna do *spasmus* in droma ocus in muinél an tan tic ó cruadugud na féithi ocus [na] nalt atá sínti do'n leith amuigh ocus an tan bís ó na cnámaibh do'n leith astigh tuictear a contrardha so. Ocus adeir fós co leighister na fiacra [*ms.* fiachla] óna creachad ocus go nglantar an anáil uadha. **Bídh a fis agad co fuil inad (sic) ann nach dlegar do creachad mar atáit croidhe coisi ocus láimhe ocus dubhla[th] láimhe ocus cuisle na riged ocus corra braghad ocus toll arach ocus dergdásachtach ocus ruadhra-sach ocus gach uile inad a mbí gluasacht ocus bualad in *pulsa* seachantar hé** ocus adermáid gan a dénam a nanbhainne na brighe ocus gan adénam an tan bís fiabrus morgaighiti air neach *etrlica*.

'Here follows of the conditions of the Cautery according to Hippocrates in his own book. He lays down then that, when from shrinkage of a sinew limbs are contracted, then they must be cauterized; and again when from excess of moisture determining to the joints limbs suffer elongation, they must with a red iron or brass be cauterized. Limbs also from which their spirit and natural heat depart must be cauterized with iron, or brass, or with a wooden cauterizer. Hippocrates says that Sciatica too is cured thus; and that pains in the knees and ankles as well as of all joints in general are cured by constrictive treatment. Again, he says that limbs, joints, and sinews, stiffened by tearing, by falling, or by burning, are cured by the cautery. Moreover we affirm the same in case of spasm in the back and neck when it is external, proceeding from relaxation of sinews and joints; but when inward, from the bones, the contrary must be understood [i.e. do not fire]. He says further that by the cautery the teeth are cured, and the breath purified. **But know that there be certain places [and patients] which may not be fired: such are sole of foot and palm of hand; ball of thumb, and vein of the forearm; bend of the neck, hollow of the temples; the raging mad (*dergdásachtach*), the delirious (*ruadhra-ach*). Also every spot in which movement and a beating of the pulse is felt, be that avoided.** We say too, use not the cautery in case of enfeebled [vital] power; or when one has a putrid fever on him, and so forth.'<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> O'Grady, *Catalogue*, 268–70. I have added emphasis to O'Grady's text and made some minor adjustments to his translation.

An immediate source for this text is not known to me, though its attribution may well reflect some indirect basis in works belonging to the Hippocratic corpus, where cautery is frequently prescribed for the remedy of various physical complaints.<sup>16</sup> Certainly the importance of cautery as medical technique is clear from the well-known aphorism attributed to Hippocrates, according to which ‘those diseases that medicines do not cure are cured by the knife. Those that the knife does not cure are cured by fire [i.e. cautery]. Those that fire does not cure must be considered incurable’.<sup>17</sup> Cautery could be practised almost anywhere on the body, and typically involved the application of a gentle warmth over or alongside the blood vessels in order to change the movement or consistency of their contents. The dangers of the procedure, such as inflicting damage upon a major artery, were, however, also commonly noted in early medical sources.<sup>18</sup> For example, it is specified in the Hippocratic treatise *Peri Arthron* (‘On Joints’) that, when using cautery to treat a dislocation of the shoulder, one should take care to avoid the glands of the armpit, as they lie close to important cords and a large blood vessel.<sup>19</sup> Similar precautions are advised for phlebotomy, or the practice of extracting blood from the veins for therapeutic or diagnostic purposes. Thus, an English text on this subject from a fifteenth-century manuscript cites the medical authorities Avicenna, Walter (of Agilon?) and Galen in reminding practitioners that beneath every vein lies an artery that could easily be damaged by a careless phlebotomist, possibly resulting in a haematoma for the patient.<sup>20</sup>

The list of anatomical places where cautery should be avoided in the Irish tract from BL Add. MS 15,582 clearly had a similar cautionary function. It is noteworthy that this list ends with the general advice to exercise care near *gach uile inad a mbí gluasacht ocus bualad in pulsa*, ‘every place in which there is movement and a beating of the pulse’. This indicates that the preceding enumeration of body parts may have been intended to specify the locations of major blood vessels which, if inadvertently ruptured during surgery, could cause serious injury or even death. Indeed, one might note a correspondence between the first six items

<sup>16</sup> Two copies of a separate Irish text on cautery are found in NLI MS G11, pp 414b34–416az and NLS MS 72.1.2, fols 96v17–97r30. There, the various cautery points on the human body are described in more detail; however no authority is cited for the tract, and it contains neither the list of places in which caution should be exercised, nor the two terms that are the subject of the present discussion.

<sup>17</sup> W.H.S. Jones (trans.), *Hippocrates, volume iv: Nature of man. Regimen in health. Humours. Aphorisms. Regimen 1–3. Dreams. Heracleitus: on the universe*, Loeb Classical Library 150 (London and Cambridge, MA, 1931, reprinted 1959), 216–17 (Aph. vii.87).

<sup>18</sup> E.M. Craik, ‘Hippocratic bodily “channels” and Oriental parallels’, *Medical History* 53 (1) (2009), 105–16: 112.

<sup>19</sup> E.T. Withington (trans.), *Hippocrates, volume iii: On wounds of the head. In the surgery. On fractures. On joints. Mochlicon*, Loeb Classical Library 149 (London and Cambridge, MA, 1928; reprinted 1959), 222–9.

<sup>20</sup> Linda E. Voights and Michael R. McVaugh, ‘A Latin technical phlebotomy and its Middle English translation’, *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, New Series* 74 (2) (1984), 1–69: 31, 53 and 60–1 (text lines 292–307). The text is found in Cambridge, Gonville and Caius College MS 176/97.

in the list (*croidhe coisi ocus láimhe ocus dubhliath*) *láimhe ocus cuisle na riged ocus corra braghad ocus toll arach*, ‘sole [lit. “heart” or “centre”] of foot and palm [lit. “heart” or “central part”] of the hand; ball of thumb, and vein of the forearm; bend of the neck, hollow of the temples’) and what are still commonly recognised as the arterial pulse-points of the body, such as the dorsalis pedis artery in the foot, the ulnar and radial arteries in the forearm and hands, the carotid artery in the neck and the superficial temporal artery in the head. Many of these terms are also found in similar lists of human anatomical parts from other medieval Irish texts, such as the twelve ‘doors of the soul’ in the legal tract *Bretha Déin Chécht*, the treatment of which was understood to require considerable medical skill and therefore to incur a higher payment to the physician.<sup>21</sup> Clearly, these were considered to be vulnerable parts of human anatomy, around which any surgical procedures, such as cautery or phlebotomy, would require particular care on the part of a medical practitioner.

The pattern established by the first six items in the list from the tract on cautery would suggest that the final two terms in this series, *dergdásachtach* and *ruadhrasach*, also refer to specific parts of the human anatomy near which caution was advised during surgical treatment. In contrast to the preceding items, however, O’Grady interpreted these two singular adjectival forms as collective references to patients exhibiting symptoms of mental instability, translating *dergdásachtach* as ‘the raging mad’ and *ruadhrasach* as ‘the delirious’. In this he is followed by Mackinnon, who transcribed and translated another copy of the same text found in NLS Adv. MS 72.1.2, fol. 118v1–21, and rendered the terms in question as ‘raging mad and delirious (people)’.<sup>22</sup> The circularity of these interpretations is immediately obvious, however. The Irish text refers only to the *inadh[a]* ‘place[s]’<sup>23</sup> that should not be cauterised, and O’Grady’s addition

<sup>21</sup> D.A. Binchy (ed. and trans.), ‘*Bretha Déin Chécht*’, *Ériu* 20 (1966), 1–66: 24–5. Two similar lists of ‘doors of death’ occur in a medical catechism from NLS MS 72.1.2, fols 61r5–12 (other passages of which are discussed below), and in NLI MS G 453, fol. 44v1–4 (incorrectly described by Nessa Ní Shéaghda, *Catalogue of Irish manuscripts in the National Library of Ireland, Fasciculus X (Mss. G434–G500)* (Dublin, 1986), 37, as ‘physical signs of death’).

<sup>22</sup> Donald Mackinnon, *A descriptive catalogue of Gaelic manuscripts in the Advocates’ Library Edinburgh, and elsewhere in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1912), 14–15. Although O’Grady’s catalogue was not published by the British Museum until 1926, nearly the whole of the volume for which he was responsible was printed between 1889 and 1892, and copies were made available for consultation by other scholars (O’Grady, *Catalogue*, v). Mackinnon acknowledges his indebtedness to O’Grady both for his descriptions of medical manuscripts in the British Museum (*Descriptive catalogue*, 2) and for his transcription of the tract in question (*Descriptive catalogue*, 14–15). As Mackinnon notes, the terms in question are heavily abbreviated in this version as ‘dg.d<sup>c</sup>. r. ros<sup>c</sup>’. A third copy of this tract is found in NLI MS G11, fol. 289b, where they are written ‘*derg dasachtach 7 ruadh thrasach*’ (lines 28–9); on the latter form, see further my remarks below, page 12–21.

<sup>23</sup> *DIL*, s.v. *inad* ‘place, spot, position’, cites this term as a masculine *o*-stem, but gives two nominative plural forms, *na hionaid* and *na hinadha* (the latter indicating that the word may originally have been neuter). The form *inad* is found in the two other copies of the tract from NLS MS 72.1.2, fol. 118v17 and NLI MS G11, fol. 289b25, while the singular form in the BL manuscript copy is probably an instance of scribal haplography (that is, sg. *inadh ann* for pl. *inadha ann*).



of '[and patients]' to his translation of this term must therefore derive from his understanding of *dergdásachtach* in the following list of anatomical parts as a compound consisting of the adjective *dásachtach* preceded by the adjectival intensifier *derg*-. As I will argue further in the second part of this discussion, however, I see no reason underlying O'Grady's rendering of *ruadhrasach* as 'delirious' other than by analogy with his proposed interpretation of *dergdásachtach*.

A source that may shed some light on the meaning of the term *dergdásachtach* in this tract is an unpublished medical text from NLS Adv. MS 72.1.2 ('Gaelic II'), a compendium of material dated to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and assembled by the famous medical family, the Mull Beaton.<sup>24</sup> The text in question is structured as a kind of medical catechism, or a series of around 40 questions and answers 'dealing with topics of a miscellaneous but more or less practical nature'.<sup>25</sup> Many of the questions in this tract deal with various aspects of human anatomy, and several are concerned specifically with the identification and treatment of body parts considered to be particularly vulnerable. The term *derg dásachtach* occurs twice in this context, and in both cases it is preceded by the definite article, indicating a substantival usage. In the first reference, it forms the subject of the third question in the catechism:

Cidh fodera duine do *thērnāmh* ōn *derg dásachtaigh* dā letarthar eidir ūainibh an cinn, et duine ele gan *tērnāmh*? Nī *ansa*. Duine ann a tēid a neim<sup>26</sup> in[a] c[h]eann nō go roiccinn in n-incinn a n-inadaib idir ūanib lethed meir ō c[h]inn *īartharach* in *dīleachta*. Dā leatarthar dā *gach leith*, nī anann ag sileadh fola, go tēid d'ēg in uair tēid a neim isan incinn. *Acht* bidh furi amuith et coisgidh in loscadh a siledh fhola; *tērnaighther* de et nī roith a neim isan incinn de.

<sup>24</sup> Bannerman, *Beaton*, 114, suggests that the volume may have been first bound together by Malcolm Beaton of Pennycross.

<sup>25</sup> As described by Ronald Black in his catalogue of the National Library of Scotland manuscripts, available online at <http://www.isos.dias.ie> (see MS 72.1.2, fol. 59r1).

<sup>26</sup> I am uncertain of both the word division and meaning intended for this term. It is most probably the noun *neim*, which is attested with a range of meanings, including 'poison, venom, pus', as well as with the more abstract senses of 'malefic power, penetrating force', in which case it could be a reference either to the force of the blow that causes the wound, or to the effects of the *derg dásachtach* itself. In this case the first letter could either be a possessive pronoun or the neuter form of the definite article. The latter possibility is highly unlikely, but not entirely impossible, as *neim* is attested as a neuter noun in Old Irish (see *DIL*, s.v. *neim*). A decidedly more speculative reading would be to take it as *an eim*; the term *em* is attested in Old Irish as a feminine noun meaning 'haft' or 'handle (of a weapon)', but in this context it could be understood as some kind of reference to the object responsible for inflicting the wound: see *DIL*, s.v. *em*, *eb*. The form is clearly in the nominative here, but palatalisation of the final consonant in feminine *a*-stems on analogy with the accusative and dative forms is paralleled elsewhere in Middle Irish: see *SNG*, 243. For the dative form *eim*, see, for example, *CIH* 1587.19. The first reading would seem to give better sense, however, and I have therefore attempted to translate the term here using the somewhat neutral meaning of '(penetrating) force'.



‘Why does one person recover from the *derg dásachtach* if it [he?]<sup>27</sup> is wounded between the sutures of the head, while another person does not recover? Not difficult. There is a person in whose case its penetrating force goes into [his] head until it reaches the brain in the places between the sutures the width of a finger from the posterior end of the pupil.<sup>28</sup> If he is wounded from either side, he does not cease shedding blood, so that he dies when the force of the blow goes into the brain. But let it [i.e. the penetrating force] be upon it [i.e. the brain] from the outside, and firing [i.e. cautery] stems the flow of blood; he is recovered and its force does not reach the brain as a result of it.’<sup>29</sup>

Here, the adjectival sequence *derg dásachtach* follows the preposition *ó* + the definite article, indicating a substantival usage of the collocation. The dative singular ending of *dásachtaigh* suggests that it may have been understood as a feminine compound, although one might also argue in favour of interpreting the form as a feminine noun + adjective, which would require emendation of the first element *derg* to dat. *deirg* in this context.

The passage as a whole describes a wound in the bregma, or the portion of the skull where the frontal and parietal bones join. This region was recognised in early medical sources, such as the Hippocratic treatise on ‘Wounds of the Head’, as a particularly vulnerable part of the cranium, since it contains less bone and flesh to serve as a protective cover for the brain.<sup>30</sup> Hippocrates also specified that incisions can be made safely by a surgeon in any part of the head other than the temples or the region above them, as these areas are transversed by blood vessels which, if cut, would cause the patient to be seized with spasms.<sup>31</sup> This latter idea is paralleled in medieval Irish sources, insofar as the *toll arach* ‘hollow of the temple’ is included in both the list of vulnerable places in the tract on cautery cited above, and as one of the ‘doors of the soul’ given in *Bretha Déin Chécht*. Remarking on the latter text, D.A. Binchy’s medical acquaintance John Logan observed that:

a blow on the temple might cause a rupture of the middle meningeal artery. In such a case the patient might recover consciousness quickly, and the injury would seem to be a trivial one until, some hours later, the patient went into a coma and died.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>27</sup> It is unclear to me whether reference is being made here to the patient or the term *derg dásachtach* itself.

<sup>28</sup> See *DIL*, s.v. *dílechteae* ‘one orphaned or bereft’. Here the translation ‘pupil (of the eye)’ is not given, but note that in the Milan glosses on the psalms, Lat. *pupilli* is glossed *in dílechteai* (29c8). In Latin, the feminine form *pupilla* ‘an orphan girl, ward’ also had the meaning of ‘pupil of the eye’; I thus take this to be a translation of the Latin in an anatomical context.

<sup>29</sup> NLS MS 72.1.2, fol. 59v7–16. In this and the following passages cited from unedited texts, expansions are indicated by italics, missing letters and words are supplied in square brackets and superfluous letters are enclosed in round brackets. Word-division and punctuation are editorial.

<sup>30</sup> Withington, *Hippocrates III*, 8–13 (‘Wounds of the head’, ii–iii).

<sup>31</sup> Withington, *Hippocrates III*, 30–3 (‘Wounds of the head’, xiii).

<sup>32</sup> Binchy, ‘*Bretha Déin Chécht*’, 52.

The description in the passage on the *derg dásachtach* from the Irish medical catechism in NLS MS 72.1.2 is not explicit, but seems to be concerned with the depth of a wound affecting the bregma, noting that if the force of the wound penetrates the brain as far as the region located about an inch (*mér*)<sup>33</sup> from the back of the pupils and to either side of the bregma, the patient will be placed in danger of death, since it would be extremely difficult to stop the flow of blood. Conversely, the physician might be able to intervene by means of cautery if the wound is sufficiently shallow to have avoided penetration of the brain, perhaps because this would be more likely to affect only smaller, more superficial blood vessels. The specific source of the excessive blood loss is not entirely clear from this explanation, but it is possible that reference is being made to some artery located beneath the anterior fontanel and behind the pupils.

This hypothesis is supported by a second occurrence of the term *derg dásachtach* in the medical catechism from NLS MS 72.1.2, where it is included in a detailed description of the *féith[i] cuirp duine*, ‘vessels of a human body’.<sup>34</sup> Here again, the immediate context of the reference is a description of some part of human cranial anatomy, and the term in question is used substantivally in the nominative. This passage in its entirety constitutes one of the longest sections of the catechism, and it forms the answer to a question concerning the arrangement and depth of *féithi* in the body, starting at the head and proceeding down to the feet. Significantly, at relevant points throughout the passage, the compiler notes the location of various anatomical features that he refers to as *aigbéili* ‘dangerous parts’.<sup>35</sup> Many of these correspond to the terms denoting places that should not be fired in the text on the ‘conditions of cautery’ edited by

<sup>33</sup> The measurement of a *mér* ‘finger’ is probably about one inch or slightly less: see Kelly, *Farming*, 561–2.

<sup>34</sup> *DIL*, s.v. 1 *féith*, defines this word under (b) as ‘a fibre, sinew (perh. the orig. meaning), later also a vein’; the term is used to translate Latin *nervus* in BL MS Arundel 313 (dated to 1519: see O’Grady, *Catalogue*, 261.30). Elsewhere it glosses Latin *fibra* (for instance, Sg100a2). Many early medical sources fail to distinguish between these various types of vessels, and it is not yet clear to me from the Irish passage as a whole, which presents several difficulties of translation, whether the commentator is consistently referring to sinews, nerves, veins or arteries. The passage does seem to refer to a unified system, however, and I therefore translate the term as ‘vessel’ for present purposes.

<sup>35</sup> *DIL*, s.v. *aicbéile*, cites this word as a feminine noun meaning ‘terribleness’ or ‘fierceness’. It also states that the term is used in medieval Irish legal commentary to refer to ‘defects in various articles and transactions’, where it is translated as ‘dangerous (nature)’. See also the preceding entry s.v. *aichéil*, for which the spellings *aicméil* and *aichbéil* are also given (on the loss of lenited -b- following another consonant, see, for example, *SnG*, 324). *DIL* states that the adjective in question is attested ‘with a wide range of pejorative meanings’, including (a) ‘fierce, severe, harsh’; (b) ‘dangerous, perilous’; (c) ‘terrible, awesome’; and (d) ‘wretched, despairing’. The examples given under (b) include references to wounds on the body, for example, *do budh aigmeil gortugud na feithedh ocus na menman*, which translates Latin *timendum est de lésione neruorum et mentis* in a medical text from BL MS Eg. 89 (ed. O’Grady, *Catalogue*, 204); or *ní riachtadar gona aigbéili eislindi o cach dib ara cheili risin ré sin*, ‘no terrible dangerous wounds were exchanged from one of them to the other during that time’ (George Calder (ed. and trans.), *Togail na Tebe: the Thebaid of Statius: the Irish text*

O'Grady and Mackinnon, or to the various vulnerable body parts listed in other sources such as *Bretha Déin Chécht*.<sup>36</sup> The phrase *derg dásachtach* is given as a gloss on the opening section of the passage:

Is fisidh cinnas atáit fēith cuirp duine. An *ænfhēith* is bun dōib uili nō an fēith ar leit gach fēith dīob no cā doimhne in doimhni a corp duine atáit? Nī *ansa*. Is *ænfhēit* is bun dōibh uili *acht* geinmotā in dāna tholl ara et in t-imlicān .i. in *derg dásachtach*. Is *ann* atā (atā) a bun fēin a n-iarar an *dīlechta* ōn ūaine go ræle . . .

‘It ought to be known how the vessels in a human body are. Is a single vessel the basis of them all, or is each vessel separate, or how deep in the body of a person are they? Not difficult. A single vessel is the basis of them all, save only the two temporal fossae and the central point, i.e. the *derg dásachtach*. Its own base is in the back of the pupil from one suture to the other . . .’<sup>37</sup>

The lemma of the gloss .i. in *derg dásachtach* is ambiguous, but it would seem that the term is being used here as a reference to a vessel that serves both the temporal fossae and the *imlicān* (‘navel’ or ‘central point’).<sup>38</sup> The explanation that follows this gloss, which echoes that given for the *derg dásachtach* in the preceding excerpt from the catechism, indicates that it is associated with the anatomy of the head, since the base of the *derg dásachtach* is again said to be located beneath the bregma and behind the pupils (a *n-iarar an dīlechta ōn ūaine go ræle*, ‘in the back of the pupil from one suture to the other’).

A third reference to the *derg dásachtach*, found in a separate Irish medical text on wounds, supports these readings from the medical catechism in NLS MS 72.1.2. A shorter version of this tract, concluding before the citation in question, was edited by Winifred Wulff from the fourteenth-century RIA MS 23 F 19, with variant readings from another witness in TCD MS E 4.1 (1436).<sup>39</sup> This latter copy contains additional material not included in her edition, however, much of which is also found

(Cambridge, 1922), 290–1). See also Dwelly, *Gaelic-English Dictionary*, s.v. *aigbheil*, who gives this word in Scottish Gaelic as an obsolete form equivalent to *eagal* ‘fear, dread, terror’. In the medical catechism, the noun form is used in relation to dangerous or vulnerable parts of human anatomy, presumably because they were understood to evoke a feeling of fear or dread if seriously injured.

<sup>36</sup> For example, *craidhi na gcós* (NLS 72.1.2, fol. 63r5–6) and *dúliatha na lamh* (fol. 63r13); for the other lists, see above, note 21.

<sup>37</sup> NLS MS 72.1.2, fols 62v10–15.

<sup>38</sup> See *DIL*, s.v. *imlecán*.

<sup>39</sup> Winifred Wulff, *A mediaeval handbook of gynaecology and midwifery preceded by a section on the grades and on the treatment of wounds and some good counsel to the physician himself finishing with a discussion on the treatment of scabies*, in J. Fraser, P. Grosjean, S.J. O’Keeffe and J.G. O’Keeffe (eds), *Irish Texts V* (London, 1934), 2–11. An electronic edition of Wulff’s text is also available online, at <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/G600012/index.html>, as is her unpublished translation of the text (see <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/T600012.html>).

in a third copy of the text from NLI MS G11, pp 416b–423a.<sup>40</sup> The tract's compiler attributes his work to the authority of Galen's *Pantegni* and the *Prognostica* of Hippocrates, but the derivation would seem to be fairly indirect. Wulff likewise drew attention to the uncertainty surrounding the tract's sources, stating in the introduction to her edition that

I have not been able to find any Latin original for the section on Wounds, which contains many unusual words that I have not been able to trace, and which has no Latin terms . . .<sup>41</sup>

The tract consists mainly of curative instructions and recipes, and its account of human anatomy is not particularly detailed. However, in the longer version of the text—that containing material not included in Wulff's edition—an *derg dāsachtach* is mentioned within a series of instructions for dealing with wounds of the head.<sup>42</sup> In the E 4.1 version, the term is explicitly equated with a *cuisle* 'blood vessel':

Mad cumang an cned ⁊ na cnāma do bheith bri(i)sti, sirter an chned do shūil do mēr mura bia bri(i)sed ann. ⁊ da roibh sē ann, teasgur an crēcht co crosach muna baca an derg dāsachtach no cuslī ele . . .

'If the wound is narrow and the bones are broken, the wound is examined with the tip of your finger<sup>43</sup> if there not be an open wound there. And if it be there, the ulcer is cut crosswise if the *derg dāsachtach* or another vein does not prevent it . . .'<sup>44</sup>

This text, like the tract on cautery in BL MS Add. 15,582 and the medical catechism from NLS MS 72.1.2, suggests that an *derg dāsachtach* referred to a blood vessel in the human body, the severing of which ought to be avoided. Such an interpretation fits well with the semantics of the term's components, as illustrated above from other literary sources. Given the consistent use of the definite article in these examples, the first element *derg* 'red, bloody' might be understood substantivally here as a (possibly feminine) noun, that is, 'the red one', with the gender of the substantive

<sup>40</sup> In this witness, the end of Wulff's edition corresponds to p. 419b23 (= TCD E 4.1 (1436), p. 117). As noted by Ní Shéaghdha, *Catalogue, Fasciculus I*, 90, a fourth copy of the text is found in King's Inns 17, fol. 31c20, a fifteenth-century medical manuscript: see Pádraig de Brún, *Catalogue of Irish manuscripts in King's Inns Library* (Dublin, 1972), 45–9: 49.

<sup>41</sup> Wulff, *Mediaeval handbook*, xii.

<sup>42</sup> This section begins at p. 120a28 of TCD MS E 4.1 (1436), and p. 421b7 of NLI MS G11.

<sup>43</sup> For this expression, see the extended applications given in *DIL*, s.v. *súil* (c) 'eye', with an example from another translated medical text in BL MS Add. 15,582 (drawn from O'Grady, *Catalogue*, 272.3).

<sup>44</sup> TCD MS E 4.1 (1436), p. 120b25–31. Cf. NLI MS G11, p. 421bz: *Mad cumhung in cned ⁊ cnaim do beith bristi innti sirter do mēr ⁊ da fadair in brisidh, tesctur in cned crosach, acht muna bacaid in derg dasachtach . . .* 'If the wound is narrow and the bone is broken in it, it is examined with the finger, and if the break is discovered, the ulcer is cut crosswise, as long as the *dearg dāsachtach* does not prevent it . . .' Here, however, no specific mention is made of a *cuisle* 'vein'.

deriving from association with a relevant concept expressed by a feminine noun, such as *fuil* ‘blood’ or perhaps *féith* ‘vessel’. The second element *dásachtach* could then have served as an intensifying qualifier meaning ‘furious’, ‘violent’ or ‘uncontrolled’. As we have seen, this meaning could have a more general application than merely the clinical variety of madness associated with a person described as a *dásachtach*, since the adjective is employed elsewhere with intensive force in relation to semi-animate entities, for example in the description of the violent or rushing movement of liquid substances such as blood (as in the *Life* of St Declan), or of fluids that are purged from the body (as in *Regimen na Sláinte*). In this light, we might interpret the term *derg dásachtach* in the text on cautery edited by O’Grady, as well as in the other unpublished medical texts discussed here, as meaning something like ‘the violent/furious/uncontrolled red one/vessel’. In other words, it is a reference to a vessel, at least part of which was commonly understood to be located in the head, that would spurt blood in an intense and unrestrained manner if severed. The discovery of further examples might allow us to achieve a more precise understanding of this aspect of medieval scientific terminology. However, it can at least be argued that the term *derg dásachtach* had a quite specific technical meaning in a medical context, and that the translation ‘raging mad [patients]’ initially offered by O’Grady should be rejected.

### RÚAD (FH)RASACH

In the tract on cautery cited above, the final item given in the list of vulnerable places in the human body is *ruadhrasach*. O’Grady translated this term as ‘delirious’, evidently interpreting it as another reference to patients showing symptoms of mental disorder, on analogy with his rendering of *dergdásachtach* as ‘raging mad’. O’Grady’s translation of *ruadhrasach* formed the basis for an entry in the printed edition of *DIL*:

**rúadrasach** o, ā derg-dásachtach 7 ruadhrasach ‘delirious’ O’Grad. Cat. 269.14 (med. text, 16th cent. MS)

However, the more recently published supplement to the *DIL* offers the following additional entry:<sup>45</sup>

**rosach (rasach)** in phr. *rúad rosach (rasach)* **an ailment in horses:** do[n] nesgoit boind, 7 is maith a’ leiges uirre in clar do snaigi ... 7 ruad [MS.r.] rosach do ligin *concerning the canker of the sole (?), a good treatment for it is to pare the surface (of the canker?)* ... and release the r.r. *Celtica* ii. 38 §18. is coir in clar do buain uaithe 7 in bonn do losgad 7

<sup>45</sup> Sharon Arbuthnot and Grigory Bondarenko (compilers), Gregory Toner (ed.), *A supplement to the dictionary of the Irish language based mainly on Old and Middle Irish materials* (2013), available online at <http://edil.qub.ac.uk/supplement/index.php>.

in ruadh rasach do ligin fai an glun 52 §19. bídh a fis agad co fuil inadh ann nach dleagar do crechad mar atáit . . . ruadhrasach O'Gr. Cat. 269. ar tus don chruadcosaigi... a tarrang 7 a crechad 7 ruad rosac (rasach, v.l.) do ligen 'firstly concerning hardness of the legs ... draw it and cauterize it and let [its] ruad rosac' *Celtica* xvii 116 §7.

The *Supplement* also contains a cross-reference to this definition s.v. *rúad* 'red, of a brownish or dark red (opp. to *derg* = bright red)', where it states only that the term is also used 'In phr[ase] *rúad rosach* (name of an ailment in horses) see **rosach (rasach)**.'

These additional citations, in which *rúad rosach (rasach)* is defined as 'an ailment in horses', stem from a collection of fragmentary tracts on veterinary lore written in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and edited by Brian Ó Cuív in two separate volumes of *Celtica*.<sup>46</sup> Particular attention is paid in these tracts to the treatment of various equine ailments through the application of either cautery or phlebotomy. As the excerpts from Ó Cuív's text cited in *DIL* show, it is suggested that both *cruad-chosaigi* 'hardness of the legs' and a *nescóit boind* 'canker of the sole' might be dealt with by 'letting' or 'releasing' the *ruadh rasach* below the knee (*in ruadh rasach do ligin fai an glun*).<sup>47</sup> In his first discussion of this material, Ó Cuív did not attempt to translate the term *ruadh rasach/rosach*, merely observing the suggestion by a veterinary acquaintance that it might mean 'red resin',<sup>48</sup> and noting, in his accompanying glossary of diseases mentioned in the text, the appearance of the term in the tract on cautery translated by O'Grady.<sup>49</sup> When, some 30 years later, Ó Cuív published an additional two texts on veterinary lore that also contained the term, he added the following observations on its meaning:

It seems likely that *ruadh* is the word for 'red'. Dr John Evans tells me that when a horse's hoof is pared a form of red pus may be found; and when I was editing the H and P texts in 1952 Mr. Esmonde W. Little suggested 'red resin' as a meaning for *ruadh rasach* (see *Celtica* ii. 53). The form *roisín* is found in Irish sources as equivalent of Latin *resina*, but I have found no evidence of a form *rosach* (or *rasach*). Ó Dónaill (*Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla*) gives 'rough, horny' as meanings for *rosach*, but I have no early instances of this usage. Among the meanings which Ó Dónaill gives for *ruadh* is 'the rose, erysipelas'.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Brian Ó Cuív, 'Fragments of two mediæval treatises on horses', *Celtica* 2 (1952–4), 30–63, and Ó Cuív, 'Fragments of Irish mediæval treatises on horses', *Celtica* 17 (1985), 113–22.

<sup>47</sup> See Ó Cuív, 'Two mediæval treatises', 52–3 (§19); cf. 'Two mediæval treatises', 38–9 (§18, where the location is not specified), and Ó Cuív, 'Irish mediæval treatises', 116 (text) and 118 (trans) (§§7–8).

<sup>48</sup> Ó Cuív, 'Two mediæval treatises', 53, n. 2.

<sup>49</sup> Ó Cuív, 'Two mediæval treatises', 59.

<sup>50</sup> Ó Cuív, 'Irish mediæval treatises', 120–1.



Yet, the instruction *an ruadh rasach do ligen fai an glun* suggests that, at least in this text, *ruadh rasach* denotes something that can be ‘let’ in the lower leg of the horse rather than in the hoof, thus rendering problematic the hypothesis that it refers to a kind of ‘red resin’ or ‘pus’ emanating from the latter when it is pared to cure a canker of the sole. Moreover, the inclusion of ‘*ruadhrasach*’ in the text on cautery from BL Add. MS 15,582 within what appears to be a list of ‘pulse points’, or locations of major blood vessels in a human, indicates that the usage of the term is not exclusive to a veterinary context, and indeed that it may have had a meaning applicable to human anatomy akin to that of the other items in the list.

The form of the term is uncertain. One possibility is that the initial adjectival element *rúad*, for which *DIL* gives both the meanings ‘red, of a brownish or dark red, oft[en] of blood-stains’ and ‘strong, mighty, formidable’, was understood substantivally, much like *derg* in the phrase *derg dásachtach*. Such usage is widely attested in both masculine and feminine nominal forms for this word, for example, masc. *an rua* ‘a red-haired person’ or ‘a reddish-brown colour’,<sup>51</sup> or fem. *an rua* ‘the rose, erysipelas’.<sup>52</sup> The latter meaning, noted by Ó Cuív, is given by Ó Dónaill for the feminine form *rua*<sup>2</sup> (var. f. *ruadh*<sup>2</sup>), but by Dinneen for the feminine abstract form *ruaidhe* (var. *ruadha*), and refers to the disease characterised by an acute (and typically bacterial) infection of the skin and underlying fat tissues, resulting in a reddish inflammation on various parts of the body.<sup>53</sup> One might thus see a semantic connection between Ó Dónaill’s definition of the term *rosach* as ‘rough, horny’ (e.g. *lámha rosacha* ‘horny hands’ and *prátaí rosacha* ‘rough-skinned potatoes’)<sup>54</sup> and a red-coloured inflammation on the surface of the skin. However, such an interpretation proves particularly tenuous when set in the context of the other arterial pulse-points listed in the tract on cautery examined in the first section of this paper, or in that of the veterinary text on horses, where the ‘*ruadh rasach*’ is said to be ‘let’ or ‘released’ below the knee.

Once again, some additional light might be shed on the meaning of the term in question by attestations in unedited sources. A first example is the variant reading *rúadh fhrasach*, apparently written as two separate words across a line boundary, in the copy of the tract on cautery from NLI MS G11.<sup>55</sup> This is the earliest of the three witnesses of this text, but was evidently known to neither O’Grady nor Mackinnon when they transcribed the copies in BL Add. MS 15,582 and NLS MS 72.1.2, respectively.<sup>56</sup> Two

<sup>51</sup> Ó Dónaill, *Fócloir*, s.v. *rua*<sup>1</sup>; see also the reference in Dinneen, *Foclóir*, s.v. *ruadh*, to *na Trí Ruadha Raoireann* ‘the three Reds of Reary’ in folklore.

<sup>52</sup> Ó Dónaill, *Fócloir*, s.v. *rua*<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>53</sup> See also Tomás Ó Máille, *An Béal Beo*, new edition by Ruairí Ó hUiginn (Dublin, 2002), 143.

<sup>54</sup> Ó Dónaill, *Fócloir*, s.v. *rosach*<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>55</sup> NLI MS G11, p. 289b25–32, at lines 28–9.

<sup>56</sup> See above, n. 22. The first fascicle of Ní Shéaghda’s catalogue of NLI manuscripts was not published until 1967.



analyses of the form found in the G11 witness are possible. One is that it was understood by the scribe as a compound consisting of the adjectives *rúad* and *frasach/frosach*, with the expected lenition of the *-f-* resulting in deletion of the initial sound in the second element. This interpretation is supported by *DIL*, which gives several other examples of *rúad-* in unstable compounds with the meanings ‘red’, ‘bloody’ and ‘strong, formidable’.<sup>57</sup> The other possibility is that *rúad* was understood substantivally as a feminine noun followed by the lenited adjective *frasach/frosach*. Either way, is not difficult to see how this form might have given rise to the spelling *rúadhrasach* found elsewhere, though one must necessarily consider the possibility that the spelling *rúadh fhrasach* might also be a back-formation from *rasach/rosach*.

If the adjective *rúad* was used substantivally here, it is not immediately clear why its gender was taken as feminine, although this may have originated on analogy with the gender of whatever concept the adjective *rúad* was intended to describe—evidently something characterised by ‘redness’. Given that the term *rúad (fh)rasach* occurs in what would appear to be a list of pulse points in the text on cautery, and is described as something that should be ‘let’ from a horse’s leg in the veterinary tracts edited by Ó Cuív, it is tempting to offer a similar suggestion to that proposed above in relation to *derg dásachtach*: namely that the concept in question is either blood or a blood vessel, and that the gender of the substantive may derive from association with a word like f. *fuil* ‘blood’ or f. *féith* ‘vessel’.<sup>58</sup>

In this regard, it may be of significance that the adjective *frasach/frosach*, while having the primary meaning of ‘showery’ or ‘rainy’, is sometimes employed to depict a ‘shower of blood’, as is exemplified by a reference in *Togail na Tebe* to the *fēr frasach forderg d’fuil na naiden* ‘grass bedewed and crimson with the infant’s blood’.<sup>59</sup> Similar sanguinary imagery is found with the related noun-form *fras/fros*, which can mean ‘a shower (primarily of rain, snow, etc.)’ but also a ‘gush’ or ‘stream’ of any liquid, including blood;<sup>60</sup> this is also the case for the verbal noun-form *frasugud*, which is used in *Togail na Tebe* to describe a battle that caused ‘the crimson blood to shower from the bodies and heads of those mighty soldiers’ (*frasugud na fola fordeirgi re corpaib 7 cendaib na milead moradbul sin*).<sup>61</sup> Thus, we might read the phrase *rúad (fh)rasach* as a reference to something that is ‘red and showery’ or that produces a ‘shower of redness’.

<sup>57</sup> *DIL*, s.v. *rúad*.

<sup>58</sup> See above, pp 11–12.

<sup>59</sup> Calder, *Togail na Tebe*, 134–5 (line 2095).

<sup>60</sup> *DIL*, s.v. 1 *fras* (*fros*).

<sup>61</sup> Calder, *Togail na Tebe*, 24–5 (lines 399–400); for the verbal noun form, see *DIL*, s.v. *frasugud*.

Another possibility, quite closely connected to the preceding one, is to understand the element *frasach* in the figurative sense of ‘plentiful’ or ‘copious’—a definition given in most modern dictionaries, but indicated in *DIL* only under entries for the nominal form *fras*.<sup>62</sup> In that case, (*an*) *rúadh fhrasach* could mean something like ‘(the) plentiful red one’, or perhaps ‘the full-blooded one’. This would seem to be the sense intended in a second attestation of the term spelled with a lenited *-f-*, which is found in a series of proverbs and riddles from St Patrick’s College, Armagh, Donnellan MS 6, written in the nineteenth century by Art Bennett:<sup>63</sup>

*Is í an óige an bhean mhaiseach*  
*Is í an aois a’ dubh-chosach*  
*Is í an tsláinte an ruadh-fhrasach*  
*Is é an saoghal a’ fear cleasach.*

‘Youth is the beauteous woman  
 Age is the black-footed one  
 Health is the *ruadh-fhrasach* (‘full-blooded one’?)  
 Life is the deceitful man.’<sup>64</sup>

A slightly different version of this quatrain was recited by Párra Ó Dálaigh of Bocks, Co. Monaghan, who was nearing 90 years of age when he was interviewed sometime before 1911.<sup>65</sup> Here, the word in question is recorded as *an rua-rasach*, and it is compared with ‘youth’ instead of ‘health’:

*Sí an óige an rua-rasach,*  
*Sí an tsláinte an bhean mhaiseach,*  
*Sé an saol an fear cleasach,*  
*Má tá, sé an bás an dubh-chosach.*

<sup>62</sup> *DIL*, s.vv. 1 *fras* (*fros*) (b); 2 *fras* and 3 *fras-frais*-.

<sup>63</sup> For an account of this manuscript, which is on permanent loan to St Patrick’s College, Maynooth, see Pádraig Ó Fiannachta, *Clár lámhscríbhinní Gaeilge. Leabharlanna na cléire agus mionchnuasaigh. Fascúl II* (Dublin, 1980), 10–13. The stanza is included within a series of quatrains and old sayings beginning on p. 145, which are claimed to derive from the ancient professional poets (*rann, agus seanraidhte a cumadh agus a fagadh mur sheud-chomhartha againn air bonn o laime na saor-ollamh cian-aosda*). In his catalogue (12–13), Ó Fiannachta gives the incipits of each item in this section, but has omitted the stanza in question, which is clearly demarcated on p. 148 of the manuscript. On Art Bennett, see Tomás Ó Fiaich and Liam Ó Caithnia (eds), *Art Mac Bionaid: Dánta* (Dublin, 1979), 7–32, and also Ruairí Ó hUiginn, ‘An nua-rúaraíocht’, in *Diasa díograise: aistí i gcuimhne ar Mháirtín Ó Briain*, in Mícheál Mac Craith and Pádraig Ó Héalaí (eds), 389–412: 394–400, (Indreabhán, 2009).

<sup>64</sup> My translation. The quatrain recorded by Art Bennett was edited and translated by Énrí Ua Muirgheasa, *Seanfhocla Uladh* (Dublin, 1907), 294–5, who renders the third line as ‘health is a red showerer’.

<sup>65</sup> Éamonn Ó Tuathail, ‘Measgradh ó Fhearnmhaigh’, *Béaloideas* 3 (1931), 121–34: 123. This collection of material was subsequently republished in Éamonn Ó Tuathail, ‘Béaloideas ó Fhearnmhaigh’, *Clogher Record* 3 (1975), 254–68.

‘Youth is the *rua-rasach* (full-blooded one?),  
 Health is the beauteous woman,  
 Life is the deceitful man,  
 If it is so, death is the black-footed one.’<sup>66</sup>

The metaphorical comparison of health or youth to a beautiful or ornamented woman in these examples is straightforward, as is the analogy of life to a wily or deceitful man. I am uncertain of the precise meaning of *an dubh-chosach* ‘the black-footed one’ as a representation of age or death; if not intended as a mere physical description, however, it might be an allusion to folkloric accounts relating to Dubhchosach, the stag of Binn Ghulbain in Co. Sligo. In a tale surviving in several manuscript copies dating from as early as the late-eighteenth century, Dubhchosach is one of the creatures sought by the eagle Léithín for an answer to the question of whether there had ever been a night as cold as the one just passed, since he is a survivor of the Deluge and the *óglaoch as sine cuimhne da choimhshine féin a n-Eirind é*, ‘the hero of oldest memory of all those of his generation in Ireland’.<sup>67</sup>

These first three analogies do, however, provide some context for the fourth comparison made in the stanza, where health and youth are equated to *an ruadh-fhrasach* and *an rua-rasach*, respectively. Here, the reference is surely not to a disease of some kind, nor to a specific part of the anatomy. If we accept that the spelling *ruadh-fhrasach* given in the first version of the quatrain is not a back-formation, the most fitting interpretation may again be to understand the adjectival element *frasach* in the Bennett manuscript as ‘plentiful, copious’. P.L. Henry evidently took the element *ruadh-* to be an intensifying prefix when he translated the line in question as ‘health is an almighty spender’;<sup>68</sup> this is certainly plausible if reference is being made to the excesses or frivolities often associated with youthful or healthy individuals who are not faced with the immediate prospect of death or old age. However, if we instead understand the first element as a substantival reference to blood or a blood vessel, we might also interpret the line as meaning something like ‘health is the plentiful red one’—or in other words, as a reference to an individual who has a plentiful supply of blood coursing through his veins. Such a description could be symbolic of the strength and robustness that is associated with youth and health, a point to which the well-attested usage of the adjective *ruad* in the figurative sense of ‘strong’ or ‘formidable’ lends support.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, we find a comparable use of the adjective *frasach* in a bardic praise-poem written by Alexander Cameron for Donald Cameron of Lochiel in 1746, in which the status, bravery and

<sup>66</sup> Ó Tuathail, ‘Béaloides’, 257 (my translation).

<sup>67</sup> Douglas Hyde, ‘The adventures of Léithín’, *Celtic Review* 10 (1914–16), 116–43: 135 (text) and 124 (trans.).

<sup>68</sup> P.L. Henry, *Dánta ban: poems of Irish women early and modern* (Cork, 1991), 104–5.

<sup>69</sup> *DIL*, s.v. *ruad* (b). A similar semantic development can be seen in the adjective *cródae*, ‘bloody, crimson, red’, which also came to mean ‘valiant, brave’: see *DIL*, s.v.

sturdy constitution of the dedicatee is described using the imagery of the plentiful blood (*fuil fhrasach*) that courses through his body:

*An t-òg fìrinneach smachdail  
Nach robh tais an àm cruadail;  
Is beag iongnadh an t-àrdan  
Bhith gu h-àrd ann do ghruaidhean,  
Is a liuthad fuil rìoghail  
Tha sìoladh mu d'ghuaillibh.*

***Gur lìonmhor fuil fhrasach***  
*Tha air a pasgadh fo d'léinidh  
O shliochd Mhànuis Mhic Cairbre ...*

'The youth righteous, commanding  
Who was not timid in the face of danger;  
It is little wonder that pride  
Should be high in your cheeks,  
When so much royal blood  
Is flowing around your shoulders.'

**'Indeed plentiful [is] the copious blood**  
That is wrapped up under your shirt  
From the race of Manus Mac Cairbre ...'<sup>70</sup>

This interpretation would also offer some insight into the use of the term *rúad (fh)rasach* in a medical context. Thus, the instruction to 'let the *ruadh rasach* below the knee' in the veterinary tracts on horses edited by Ó Cuív may simply have referred to a place where phlebotomy could be carried out to treat a particular ailment (in this case, a canker of the sole), since one could locate a major vessel there that would produce a copious quantity of blood. It would also suit the text on cautery, where the term '*ruadhhrasach*' occurs at the end of a list of body parts considered dangerous, apparently because they were the location of major blood vessels.

It is possible, however, that in both of these texts the anatomical referent denoted by the phrase *rúad (fh)rasach* was intended to be even more specific. Some support for this hypothesis can be found in one further attestation of the term, which occurs within the passage on the 'vessels' (*féithi*) of the human body from the medical catechism in NLS MS 72.1.2, discussed above in relation to the *derg dásachtach*.<sup>71</sup> Here we find what appears to be a plural form of the term, namely *ruadha rasacha*, within one

<sup>70</sup> William J. Watson (ed.), *Bardachd Ghaidhlig: specimens of Gaelic poetry, 1550–1900* (Stirling, 1932; 2nd edn), 95; translation and emphasis are mine.

<sup>71</sup> See above, pp 9–10.

of the numerous references that occur throughout the passage to ‘dangerous places’ (*aigbéili*) in the human body. As in the veterinary tract on horses, it is specified—albeit this time in relation to human anatomy—that the body part in question is located in the lower legs:

Atā dono ceire gabhla eisdib isin muinéal et [a d]ō dīb sin isan dā cūilfhēith gu ngabad re tæbh in dro[m]a dā gach leith go roiteadh na leasa et ar fut in dā colpa sīs et ar leatæbh na troigeadh co nuigi na hoirnibh, gonadh ann sin toirisit an dā gabhail sin et is orro sin atāit na haigbēil so .i. fillis ana fūathrog et craidhi na gcos. In dā gabail ele fona troighibh anís gabaidd ar aithibh na sliasat go tiagaid isna cosuibh sis 7 is orro sin atāit na rūadha rasacha.

‘There are then four branches [of vessels] from those into the neck and [two] of those into the two vessels in the back of the neck, and they go along the side of the back on each side until they reach the haunches and all the way down the two calves and on one side of the feet up to the toes, and it is there that those two branches stop, and it is upon those that these dangerous places are, i.e. the fold of the loins and the soles of the feet. The two other branches under the feet from below go on the surfaces of the thighs and down into the legs, and it is upon those that the *ruadha rasacha* are.’<sup>72</sup>

Here, the term in question cannot have been understood as a compound, the pluralisation of which would ordinarily give the form *ruadh-rasacha*. As noted above, Dinneen gives *ruadha* as a variant for the feminine singular abstract noun form *ruaidhe* ‘erysipelas’,<sup>73</sup> but one would not expect the plural form *rasacha* to follow a singular noun. However, if we accept the evidence of the preceding examples, which indicate that the initial element *rúad* may have been understood substantivally as a feminine, probably *ā*-stem noun, one could argue that the form *ruadha rasacha* simply arose from the pluralisation of both the noun and its following adjective. In that case, we would normally expect a non-lenited form of the adjective, that is, *frasacha/frosacha*. However, it is also possible that the form *ruadh fhrasach* had come into such common use as a technical medical term—a suggestion supported by the frequent abbreviation of its first element to a single letter in manuscripts<sup>74</sup>—that the initial sound was lost altogether, and second element was re-analysed as the adjectival form *rasach/rosach*, which was subsequently pluralised as *rasacha*.

It is noteworthy, moreover, that the section on vessels in the human body from the medical catechism in NLS 72.1.2 specifies that the *ruadha rasacha* are to be found *isna cosuibh* ‘in the (lower) legs’, a point that accords with the instruction in the veterinary tract on horses to ‘let the *ruadh rasach*

<sup>72</sup> NLS MS 72.1.2, fols 62v10–63v4.

<sup>73</sup> See above, p. 14.

<sup>74</sup> As seen in the example above, p. 6 n 22.

below the knee'. One might ask, therefore, whether this could be a specific anatomical location with which the phrase came to be associated. Indeed, other medieval Irish sources confirm that the area around the knee was recognised as a vulnerable part of the body and the location of important vessels. For example, the list of 'doors of the soul' in *Bretha Déin Chécht* includes the *dercc nixuide* (.i. *aniar*), translated by D.A. Binchy as 'the hollow of the ham (popliteal fossa), .i. from behind'<sup>75</sup>—regarding which Binchy's medical acquaintance, Dr Logan, observed that 'a wound ... in the popliteal fossa might quickly cause death from loss of blood',<sup>76</sup> presumably via the popliteal artery or vein. Similarly, the list of 'doors of death' found in NLI MS G453 concludes with the following item:

... an dā féith re n-apurtar fraig ⁊ is ē ionad ina bfuilet lethad baisi  
ōn glūn suas ⁊ lethad dā mēir ōn glūn síos. Is aigmēl ⁊ is guasachtach  
(= gūasacht?) dā ngontar nō dā ngerrtar iad.

'... the two vessels (*féith*) that are called *fraig* ("wall" or "shield"?),<sup>77</sup> and that is the place that is the width of a palm<sup>78</sup> up from the knee and the width of two inches down from the knee. It is a danger and a peril if they are wounded or cut.'<sup>79</sup>

This description is echoed in a question from the medical catechism from NLS MS 72. 1. 2:

Is fisidh cá féith a curp duine dianad ainm fráic et cáit atáit a haigbéile.  
Mar leithed baisi ōn glūn suas et leithed mér uada síis et is de sin is  
comhainm.

'It ought to be known what vessel in the body of a person has the name *fraic*, and where its dangerous parts are. As the width of a palm from the knee upwards and the width of an inch from it downwards, and it is that to which the term applies.'<sup>80</sup>

It is clear from these examples that the knee was acknowledged not only as a particularly vulnerable area in the body, but also as the location of multiple vessels near which surgical care should be exercised. It is therefore

<sup>75</sup> Binchy, '*Bretha Déin Chécht*', 24–5 (§2A).

<sup>76</sup> Binchy, '*Bretha Déin Chécht*', 52.

<sup>77</sup> *DIL*, s.vv. 1–5 *fraig*, gives several meanings for this term, including '(interior) wall', 'shield', 'pointed instrument' or 'physician's lancet'. See also *DIL*, s.v. 2 *frac* 'a hand (poet.)'. The anatomical application here seems to relate to the surface area of the body underneath which certain vessels can be located, rather than to the vessels themselves. However, it is not clear to me whether or not the term is simply being used in an extension of one of the meanings attested in *DIL*: if so, it may be one based on an approximation of the size or shape of the body part described.

<sup>78</sup> Kelly, *Farming*, 562, takes the *bas* 'palm' to be a measurement equivalent to about four inches.

<sup>79</sup> NLI MS G453, fol. 44v3–4.

<sup>80</sup> NLS MS 72.1.2, fol. 62r1–5.

possible that the reference to the *ruadha rasacha* in the medical catechism was similarly understood to denote a vessel around or below the knee, although given the paucity of attestations for the term in a medical context, this proposal must remain in the realm of speculation.

Nevertheless, the foregoing analysis does allow us to establish the following semantic clarifications with some certainty. First, it can be established that attestations of the term *rúad (fh)rasach* do not occur exclusively in texts concerned with diseases in horses, but are also found in descriptions of human anatomy. As seen in the Ulster proverb recorded by Art Bennett, moreover, the word may also have had an extended metaphorical sense as a symbol of human strength, youth and good health. The definition of *rúad rosach (rasach)* as ‘an ailment in horses’ that is given by *DIL*, s.v. *rosach (rasach)*, is thus not satisfactory. Second, the evidence outlined above allows for an alternative interpretation of this terminology to that offered by O’Grady, whose translation of *ruadhrasach* as ‘delirious [patients]’ in the list of body parts from the text on cautery appears to have no basis other than by analogy with his translation of *dergdásachtach* as a general reference to individuals exhibiting certain symptoms of mental instability or uncontrollable violence. A closer analysis of the form and use of *ruadh (fh)rasach* in early medical sources demonstrates that its meaning parallels that of *derg dásachtach*, insofar as it denotes a vessel in either humans or animals that is understood to ‘shower’ a copious quantity of blood if severed.



